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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.**

**The Worst Disaster: The Decisive Point and the Fall of Singapore**

by

**Don C. Murray**

**Commander, United States Navy**

**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature: \_\_\_\_\_**

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## **Abstract**

Britain allowed Japan to seize the island fortress of Singapore by neglecting the decisive points associated with Singapore's defense. Analysis of Britain's defensive preparations reveals several complexities associated with decisive points. Decisive points can emerge. These new decisive points may be difficult to identify and even more difficult to prove to strategic commanders. One new decisive point may lead to another and updated planning is required with these decisive points in mind. Also, emerging decisive points elevate risk. With the emergence of a new decisive point, the commander's objectives grow without an immediate and comparable increase in forces. Finally, an operational commander may not be able to act on a decisive point due to political or strategic reasons. As demonstrated in the defense of Singapore, neglect of decisive points can lead to military disaster.

## **Introduction**

In the years, months, and days prior to the outbreak of World War II in the Pacific, British commanders failed to control the decisive points necessary to defend their prized fortress island of Singapore. As a result, in early 1942 British forces in Singapore were swiftly defeated by Imperial Japan.<sup>1</sup> Forfeiting over 70,000 able-bodied military men, this single capitulation marked Britain's largest surrender of military forces in its history.<sup>2</sup> British Prime Minister Winston Churchill would later refer to the fall of Singapore as "the worst disaster... of British history."<sup>3</sup>

By neglecting decisive points, Britain failed to deny key landing sites, roads, and airfields to the Japanese. This failure allowed Japanese commanders to take substantial risks which led to significant gains. At the time of British surrender, Japanese forces were both substantially smaller than Britain's and hindered by failing logistics.<sup>4</sup> A senior Japanese planning officer argued to end the Japanese assault as "supplies of shells, gasoline, and food were dangerously low and further supplies unlikely."<sup>5</sup> Yet British forces could neither stop Japan nor stage a counterattack. German generals advised Japan that the capture of Singapore would take five divisions a year and a half to accomplish.<sup>6</sup> Instead, with only three divisions, 70 total days of fighting, and a single week-long assault on Singapore itself, Japan forced the British commander to admit defeat.<sup>7</sup> The precipitous fall of Singapore begs

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn, *Did Singapore Have to Fall? Churchill and the Impregnable Fortress*. (New York, NY: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Callahan, *The Worst Disaster: The Fall of Singapore*. (London: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1977), 19.

<sup>4</sup> Although estimates vary, troop strength is approximated as follows: Japanese, 60,000 men; British 87,000 men. Hack/Blackburn, 188-193.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Farrell and Sandy Hunter (eds.), *Sixty Years On: The Fall of Singapore Revisited*. (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2002), 196.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>7</sup> Hack/Blackburn, 1. Farrell/Hunter, 197, 241.

the question of how British operational commanders failed to set conditions for tactical success on the battlefield. The following pages examine a single operational art concept in that failure, that of the decisive point, and considers its importance and its complexities for the British ante-war commander.

Decisive points are deceptively complex. This paper examines three aspects of their complexity. First, decisive points can emerge from an area where no decisive point previously existed. Such new decisive points can be difficult to identify; it takes a determined and insightful operational commander to uncover them. Once recognized, a newly discovered decisive point may lead to the discovery of even more decisive points. New planning is required with these decisive points in mind. Second, decisive points are closely related to risk. While risk for the operational commander can come from many sources, in this study they are considered as a function of forces (resources) and objectives. When forces are adequate to accomplish the objective, risk is low. When forces are inadequate, risk is high. With the emergence of a new decisive point, the commander's objectives grow without a comparable increase in forces. Until force levels are adjusted for the new decisive point, the risk associated with it is elevated. Depending on force availability, this risk may never be mitigated. Finally, for political or strategic reasons, a decisive point may be off limits to an operational commander; even with the proper identification of a decisive point, the operational commander may be unable to take action. A study of Britain's defense of Singapore serves to illustrate each of these points.

This paper will discuss the concept of the decisive point, both as addressed by United States joint doctrine and as proposed by the classic military operational art theorists Jomini and Clausewitz. It then provides a brief background on British interests and forces in

Singapore prior to World War II. The paper next addresses several complexities pertinent to the decisive point that the British encountered: 1) the difficulty the British had in identifying the Malay Peninsula as a key decisive point related to the defense of Singapore, 2) the trouble that the British operational commander had in convincing his superiors that he had, in fact, identified a new decisive point, 3) how the identification of the Malay Peninsula as a decisive point led to the discovery of Thailand's Kra Isthmus as a decisive point, and 4) the planning that followed these discoveries. After a discussion of these complexities, the difficulty that the British operational commander faced in appropriating forces to control his new decisive points is addressed. Next, the strategic and diplomatic limitations placed on Singapore's operational commander are examined. This paper concludes with lessons learned for today's operational commander.

### **A Discussion of the Decisive Point**

Joint Publication 5-0 defines the decisive point as “a geographic place, specific key event, critical factor, or function that, when acted upon, allows commanders to gain a marked advantage over an adversary or contribute materially to achieving success.”<sup>8</sup> The decisive point is an important concept in relation to centers of gravity. If the center of gravity is “the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act,”<sup>9</sup> then “[decisive points] are the keys to attacking or protecting them.”<sup>10</sup> While the operational commander may identify many decisive points in his area of operations, “only a few will truly have operational ... significance relative to an adversary's center of gravity.”<sup>11</sup> “The

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<sup>8</sup> Chairman, United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operations Planning*, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0 (Washington DC: CJCS, 26 December 2006) GL-10.

<sup>9</sup> Chairman, United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication (JP) 1-02, (Washington DC: CJCS, 17 October 2007) 81.

<sup>10</sup> JP 5-0, VI-16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

commander then designates the most important decisive points for further planning and allocates sufficient resources to produce the desired effects against them... If a defender controls such a point, it can exhaust the attacker's momentum and facilitate the defender's counterattack.”<sup>12</sup>

The decisive point is also addressed by classic military operational theorists. French General Antoine Henri Jomini defines decisive points as follows:

...those [points] which are capable of exercising a marked influence either upon the result of the campaign or upon a single enterprise ... The decisive points of a theater of war are of several kinds. The first are the geographical points...whose importance is permanent and a consequence of the configuration of the country... [t]hose points the possession of which would give the control of a junction of several valleys and of the center of the chief lines of communication in a country.<sup>13</sup>

Jomini notably considers geographic decisive points to be permanent. His definition dismisses the fact that geographies change or that technology can lessen or negate geographic considerations. Non-military developments, such as increased commerce, may drive the development of roads, port facilities, and airfields. New transportation technologies, such as aircraft and landing craft, also improve access to remote locations. Over time, a geographic area once considered inaccessible may develop into an available communications hub.

The writings of Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz avoid the traps of Jomini's definition by never explicitly defining the term. Instead Clausewitz uses the concept of decisive points (without explanation) in relation to his development of the center of gravity. Nonetheless, in its ambiguity Clausewitz' discussion may best hint at the complexity of the decisive point: “Relative superiority, that is, the skillful concentration of superior strength at the decisive point, is more frequently based on the correct appraisal of this decisive point, on

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., VI-16 – VI-17.

<sup>13</sup> Baron De Jomini, *The Art of War*. Translated by G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971), 78.

suitable planning from the start; which leads to appropriated disposition of forces, and on the resolution needed to sacrifice nonessentials for the sake of essentials.”<sup>14</sup> Clausewitz goes on to say that “the best strategy is always to be very strong; first in general and then at the decisive point.”<sup>15</sup> In his excellent advice regarding decisive points, Clausewitz hints at the concept’s inherent complexity. That is, what if decisive points are not correctly appraised from the start? What if, due to a dynamic environment, new decisive points emerge over time and are not immediately recognized? Once recognized, what if the decisive point, for political or strategic reasons, is beyond the control of the operational commander? What if force disposition is set at the strategic level prior to identifying a decisive point at the operational level?

Modern definitions note decisive points as geographic, force, and cyber-oriented points.<sup>16</sup> In this study, decisive points are limited to geographic locations. The objective of the commander of British forces in 1941 Malay was the continued physical occupation of Singapore. The center of gravity for the commander to achieve his objective, his source of power and strength, were his military forces in Singapore and Malaya. The decisive point, that is, the key to attacking the British commander’s center of gravity, was Britain’s Malay Peninsula and Thailand’s Kra Isthmus, specifically their landing sites, airfields and roads (see Figure 1).

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<sup>14</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*. Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 232.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>16</sup> Milan N. Vego, *Operational Warfare*. (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2000), 36.



## Why Singapore?

Prior to war with Japan, Britain's Malaya<sup>17</sup> territory was an incredibly strong resource for the British Empire. Affectionately known as Britain's dollar arsenal, Malaya provided over fifty percent of the worldwide supply of rubber and tin.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Malaya



Figure 1. Japanese Invasion of Malaya, December 8, 1941 - January 31, 1942. (Reprinted from OnWar.com, <http://www.onwar.com/maps/wwii/pacific1/malaya4142.htm> (accessed 25 November 2007)).

<sup>17</sup> The British territory of Malaya includes Singapore. In 1957, Malaysia became an independent state. In 1965, Singapore seceded from Malaysia. A.J Kennedy, *A History of Malaya*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. (Kuala Lumpur: S. Abdul Majeed & Co., 1962, 1993), 293, 328.

<sup>18</sup> Ong Chit Chung, *Operation Matador: Britain's War Plans against the Japanese 1918-1941*. (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997), 1, 61.

provided a communications link between the British Empire in India and in the Far East (Hong Kong, Australia, and New Zealand). As early as 1919, Britain's famed Admiral Jellicoe proposed that a British Far East fleet be created to protect British interests in the region.<sup>19</sup> Jellicoe envisioned a capital ship fleet that included eight battleships, eight cruisers, and associated escorts.<sup>20</sup> Though Jellicoe's fleet never came to fruition, Britain did create a port facility in Singapore that could support a smaller version of the fleet Jellicoe proposed.<sup>21</sup> This fleet would be dispatched to the Far East only in time of crisis.<sup>22</sup> Until the fleet arrived, however, the British Army would defend the Singapore port facility.<sup>23</sup> This 'period before relief,' that is, the time that the Army needed to hold out until the Royal Navy would arrive, was initially set at 42 days.<sup>24</sup> Thus the British Army in Malay was charged with a relatively limited task: the point defense of the Singapore port facility.

### **Complexities Associated with an Emerging Decisive Point**

Given a dynamic environment like the Malay Peninsula of the 1930s, decisive points will evolve and emerge. In the case of Singapore, decisive points materialize from both technological advances (i.e. improvements in Japanese air and amphibious technology) and from economic development (i.e. British Malaya's improvements in port facilities, roads, and railways). Identifying these decisive points as they emerge requires vigilance on the part of operational commanders and their staffs. If emerging decisive points are not correctly identified early in the operational planning process then the entire plan may be unworkable, and the operational commander may find corrective measures extremely difficult to

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<sup>19</sup> Louis Allen, *Singapore 1941-1942*. (London: Davis-Poynter Limited, 1977), 38.

<sup>20</sup> James Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain's Eastern Empire, 1919-1941*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1981), 29.

<sup>21</sup> Neidpath, 100-106.

<sup>22</sup> Brian P. Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940-1942*. (Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2005), 15.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>24</sup> Hack/Blackburn, 32.

implement once the new decisive points are ultimately discovered. Poor assumptions, institutional mythology, and inter-service rivalry can work to obscure emerging decisive points. These obscuring elements may prevent or delay acceptance even when a new decisive point is correctly identified. New decisive points may reveal other, hitherto undiscovered, decisive points. These new decisive points greatly complicate the operational planning process.

Promoting the construction of a Singapore port facility, in 1922 the Admiralty made an assumption that would take operational commanders years to overcome. The Admiralty assured the War Office that a Japanese expeditionary force coming through the Malaya peninsula “would not have much chance of achieving its objective (Singapore).”<sup>25</sup> Over the next few years, the impermeability of the Malaya peninsula became firmly and systematically established as fact through war games, surveys, and the personal observations of commanders on the ground.<sup>26</sup> This fact, in turn, became British military corporate knowledge that infected planning and force levels for years to come. An effective challenge to this fact, and the discovery of the decisive point of Malaya, required an insightful and determined operational commander. Twelve years would pass until such a commander came to Malaya.

Appointed General Officer Commanding (GOC) Malaya in 1935, Major General William Dobbie concluded that the Malay Peninsula was much changed from what was

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<sup>25</sup> Ong, 32.

<sup>26</sup> The Staff Colleges conducted defense of Singapore war games in 1923 and 1924 that validated the Admiralty’s claim. A 1924 survey of Malaya by the War Office determined that the ground was too swampy for an effective ground assault. Sir Neil Malcolm, General Officer Commanding (GOC) Malaya from 1921-1924, testified that “the swamp and jungle terrain would make it very difficult to advance” and that the monsoon season from October to March made it “impossible to land on the east coast.” Additionally, in 1924 GOC Malaya, Major General Theodore Fraser, wrote of the “impossibility of cross-country movement in Malaya by any but small bodies of troops” Ong, 33-36.

reported a dozen years prior. Dobbie's innovation and resolve is captured by Singapore historian Ong Chit Chung:

Dobbie was without a doubt a man of great foresight and drive. He brought a refreshing new approach to the issues of defence, and left no stone unturned in his search for new solutions to the changing problems of defence. He did not allow himself to be bogged down with any pre-conceived ideas or prejudices. Within a few months of his arrival in Singapore, he began to question and challenge the official dictum that the overland threat throughout the Malay Peninsula was not a major cause for concern. The energetic Dobbie conducted a number of staff studies and exercises to explore and test out new concepts in defence planning.<sup>27</sup>

Dobbie found that Malaya's lucrative tin mines and rubber plantations had driven vast improvement in the peninsula's infrastructure. By 1941, Malaya possessed over 6,500 kilometers of roads, "generally admitted to be among the best in the world," as well as 1,600 kilometers of railways.<sup>28</sup> From these economic developments, Dobbie came to recognize the operational importance of the peninsula. He understood that a point defense of the Singapore port facility would not suffice.<sup>29</sup> Instead, he saw the Malaya peninsula as a decisive point in the defense of Singapore.

In a letter to the War Office, Dobbie broke with establishment consensus by querying into the "possibility of Japan attempting to capture a port on the West Coast of Malaya, with the idea of using it as an advanced base for an attack on Singapore."<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, from reports of Japanese operations in China, Dobbie noted advances in Japanese amphibious operations.<sup>31</sup> To force his point with the War Office, Dobbie directed his Chief of Staff,

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<sup>27</sup> Ong, 63.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>31</sup> Stanley L. Falk, *Seventy Days to Singapore*. (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1975) 45.

Colonel Arthur Percival,<sup>32</sup> to draft a “major appreciation which encompassed the various points gathered from the exercises and staff studies.”<sup>33</sup>

In examining the Malaya peninsula, Percival uncovered another decisive point: Thailand’s Kra Isthmus. Percival’s 1937 appreciation concluded that because of the strength of Singapore’s immediate defenses, a direct assault by the Japanese would be likely to fail.<sup>34</sup> A more likely course of action would be a methodical approach through the Malay/Thai Peninsula, where the Japanese would seize or construct air fields from which it could conduct attacks on Singapore.<sup>35</sup> “From this ‘Japanese’ appreciation, Percival deduced a number of lessons or conclusions. The two main conclusions were on the position of Thailand, and the retention of regular troops on the Malayan mainland. The use of territory in southern Thailand by the Japanese was a contingency which demanded careful study. Once the Japanese were in control of southern Thailand, food supplies from Thailand would be cut off and Singapore would be attacked by shore-based aircraft.”<sup>36</sup>

Despite Percival’s assessment, the British War Office was unmoved. Their mindset remained fixed in the corporate knowledge of the 1920s. General Dobbie was relentless in his efforts to “educate the top brass in the War Office.”<sup>37</sup> He sent his own full report to the War Office in July 1938, emphasizing the points of Percival’s assessment. By the end of

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<sup>32</sup> Percival would later be promoted to Lieutenant General and become GOC Malaya. This same Lt General Percival surrendered Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942. Frank Owen, *The Fall of Singapore*. (London: Penguin. 1960), 10.

<sup>33</sup> Sir John Smyth, *Percival and the Tragedy of Singapore*. (London: Macdonald & Co. Ltd, , 1971), 50. Ong, 69.

<sup>34</sup> Ong, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

1938 it appears that the Chiefs of Staff were ready to accept Dobbie's argument, though it took until August 1940 for them acknowledge such in a new Far East Appreciation.<sup>38</sup>

Thus after five years of intense reviews, intelligence assessments, staff estimates, war games, and reports, the new decisive points of Singapore were finally acknowledged. Acknowledgment was a key first step. Once acknowledged, planning that incorporated the decisive points could occur in earnest. Unfortunately, planning for the newly accepted decisive points was as sluggish as their acceptance had been. Though Percival made his appreciation in 1937, it was not until three years later that the Commander-in-Chief Far East directed his operational commanders to draft a plan to seize the Kra Isthmus.<sup>39</sup>

Coincidentally, immediately prior to the release of the Chiefs of Staff's 1940 appreciation, Anglo-French staff conversations also began to look at how to control the decisive point of the Kra Isthmus. The staff talks determined that "By seizing part of the Kra Isthmus, the British would deny to the Japanese the use of air and sea bases so close to the Malayan frontier. This would give some measure of protection to the chain of air bases between Burma and Malaya, through which the vital air reinforcements must pass, and ensure that the Japanese would not use the sea bases in the Kra Isthmus to threaten sea communications in the Indian Ocean."<sup>40</sup> At these staff talks, it was proposed for the first time that "the British and French should adopt a strategy of forward defence: any Japanese attempt to move into Thailand should be actively opposed and countered."<sup>41</sup> In December 1940, the Commander-in-Chief Far East wrote to the Chiefs of Staff that he was "considering the military feasibility of occupation of [the] Thai ... [Kra] Isthmus if the Japanese penetrate

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<sup>38</sup> Ong, 75-76.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>41</sup> Ong, 95.

Thailand.”<sup>42</sup> In March 1941, the Commander-in-Chief Far East directed his GOC/AOC (Air Officer Commanding) in Malaya to “prepare a plan for an advance into south Thailand with the object of taking Songkhla (Thailand) before it can be occupied by the Japanese.”<sup>43</sup> This plan to seize the decisive point of the Kra Isthmus became known as OPERATION MATADOR in August 1941.<sup>44</sup> What Singapore’s operational commander needed now, and what he did not have, were the forces and authorizations to seize the decisive point by conducting such an operation.

### **Risk and the Decisive Point**

As the Commander-in-Chief Far East discovered, the later in planning that the decisive point is discovered, the greater the risk the operational commander assumes. When the theater containing the decisive point is competing with other theaters (as was the case in World War II), the commander may not be allocated the forces adequate to achieve his objectives. Forces that might have been allocated earlier in the planning stages are now committed to other theaters of war and their redeployment is not possible. Strategic level commanders will divert forces to higher threat/higher priority theaters, thus assuming a higher degree of risk in one theater (by reducing forces) to reduce risk in another (by increasing forces). Additionally, force levels may be influenced by leaders who are promoting fresh operational strategies or simply protecting the local economy.

Once General Dobbie realized the importance of the Thai/Malay Peninsula he understood that his force levels were inadequate for the job at hand. Percival’s 1937 Japanese assessment stated that “British air and naval forces should be of sufficient strength

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>44</sup> Farrell, *Defence and Fall*, 88.

to frustrate any Japanese attempt to establish advanced bases in southern Thailand.”<sup>45</sup>

Dobbie knew they were not. To make his forces sufficient, Dobbie requested a “regular company of armored cars or light tanks”<sup>46</sup> and he calculated he would now need 24 to 27 battalions, vice the loosely 19 battalions that he commanded.<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately for British Malaya, however, the threats of war in Europe and the Middle East were consuming the majority of Britain’s force structure. The required tanks were never delivered.<sup>48</sup> Rather than receive troops and armor, the GOC Malaya found his plans undercut by the Royal Navy, Royal Air Force, and local economics.

As the war in Europe consumed Navy resources, the period that British Army troops would need to persevere until the Royal Navy could provide relief steadily increased: first to 60 days, then 90, then 180, and finally to an undisclosed period.<sup>49</sup> It became clear that not only would the GOC Malaya not receive troops but that his troops on station would be fighting indefinitely.

To make matters worse, the Royal Air Force (RAF) amplified Dobbie’s risk by increasing his defensive requirements without adding to his force levels. Without the knowledge of the GOC, the RAF put into effect a plan to build airfields on the east coast of Malaya.<sup>50</sup> The RAF had successfully convinced the War Office that it could fill the Royal Navy’s gap in the defense of Singapore; the RAF would protect Singapore by intercepting

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<sup>45</sup> Ong, 71.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>47</sup> “There were within Malaya Command, nine volunteer battalions of mixed composition, one battalion of Johore Military Force, one Malay Regiment battalion, three regular battalions and another five battalions which would be dispatched from India under an emergency reinforcement scheme... Of these, the nine volunteer battalions were numerically equal only to six plus battalions, while the three regular battalions stationed in the Malay command area would be increased to four when the Malay Regiment battalion became fully operational.” Ong, 74.

<sup>48</sup> Smyth, 55.

<sup>49</sup> Falk, 46.

<sup>50</sup> Farrell, *Defence and Fall*. 50-51



and destroying approaching Japanese ships at sea.<sup>51</sup> However, neither the RAF nor the AOC Malaya coordinated these airfield or attack plans with the GOC, though the defense of the airfields was clearly a GOC requirement.<sup>52</sup> Dobbie was rightly concerned that these airfields could be captured and used by the Japanese in an assault of Singapore. Alarming, and unknown to Dobbie, the Committee of Imperial Defence “completed a study of the possibility of Japanese shore-based air attack on Singapore” in March 1937.<sup>53</sup> The study concluded that Japan would have to “construct or capture four air bases within striking distance of Singapore.”<sup>54</sup> Incredibly, the RAF would build the exact airfields that the Japanese needed.<sup>55</sup>

To the detriment of British Malaya, RAF airfield plans failed to properly consider worldwide RAF force allocation requirements.<sup>56</sup> As with the Royal Navy, RAF aircraft were committed to British defenses outside the Malaya theater.<sup>57</sup> The GOC Malaya now found himself defending airfields with few and mostly obsolete aircraft as well as an empty port with no expectation for Royal Navy support.<sup>58</sup>

Economic issues in Malaya were also at odds with the GOC Malaya’s force requirements. In 1940, when Dobbie’s relief, Major General Lionel Bond, sought to mobilize his reserve battalions, the Overseas Defence Committee ruled that “the economic contribution of Malaya was of first importance and volunteer training should be of brief

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<sup>51</sup> Falk, 43-49.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>53</sup> Ong, 67.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ivan Simson, *Singapore: Too Little, Too Late*. (London: Cox & Wyman Ltd., 1970), 30.

<sup>56</sup> The Commander-in-Chief Far East requested 582 aircraft for the defense of Singapore. He was promised 336 by the Chiefs of Staff. When war broke out, he had 158. Of these 158 aircraft, most were obsolete. Allen, 51-52.

<sup>57</sup> Smyth, 47.

<sup>58</sup> Farrell/Hunter, 64-65.

duration.”<sup>59</sup> As a result, Bond designated reserve battalions as “only good enough for static defence duties.”<sup>60</sup> Bond effectively dismissed the reserves as impotent and determined that he needed even more troops.<sup>61</sup> “Bond calculated that he would require a land force of 39 to 42 battalions, for the external defence of the whole of Malaya”<sup>62</sup> of which only two could be reserves. Troop levels did increase, but never to the level that Bond desired.<sup>63</sup>

Though it took nearly two decades, the British operational commander had finally identified the correct decisive points and planned with them in mind. Now he found he did not have the force structure to support these plans. Not only could he not field a Navy or Air Force, he could not properly defend the facilities that these services required. As decisive points emerged, objectives continued to increase, yet forces were never adequate to meet those objectives. Thus risk remained elevated for the British commander in Malaya.

### **Diplomatic Implications of the Decisive Point**

If the decisive point is a geographic location, diplomacy and strategy can play cornerstone roles in its control. In the defense of Singapore, control of Thailand’s Kra Isthmus was a contentious diplomatic and strategic issue.

While the GOC Malaya recognized the importance of denying the Thai Peninsula to Japan, occupying Thailand was beyond control of the GOC. Several diplomatic issues needed to be addressed. Could Britain justify the occupation of a neutral country (Thailand)? Would Japan use such an occupation as justification for an attack? Diplomatic overtures to have Thailand join in a mutual defense treaty were rejected outright. Britain harbored suspicions that the government of Thailand was sympathetic to the Japanese. In 1935, the

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<sup>59</sup> Ong, 98.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> “By the end of April 1941, there were 26 regular battalions in Malaya” Ong, 163.

French Military Attaché in Bangkok reported “some secret understanding between the Thais and the Japanese, whereby the Thais would help the Japanese in their attack on Singapore and in return the Thais would recover ‘the lost provinces’ in the Malay Peninsula that were transferred to the British in 1909.”<sup>64</sup> Conversely, Britain’s Foreign Office reported that there was no secret agreement between Thailand and Japan but that the Thais would “refuse to allow free passage to the allies as it would compromise their strict neutrality”<sup>65</sup> and that “any such approach would only serve to antagonize the Thais and would be counter-productive.”<sup>66</sup> Britain’s own diplomatic arm in Thailand was of no use to the military; the ambassador was considered a pawn of Thailand’s government and as such was neither consulted about nor advised of Britain’s considerations for southern Thailand.<sup>67</sup>

Even more than diplomacy with Thailand or Japan, strategy with the United States drove control of the decisive point in Thailand. Churchill and Roosevelt were prepping American sympathies toward Britain over the war in Europe.<sup>68</sup> Those sympathies might evaporate if Britain suddenly became an aggressor nation. It was not until 2 December 1941 that the United States government begrudgingly accepted Britain’s need to control the Kra Isthmus.<sup>69</sup> On 5 December 1941 Britain’s War Office authorized the Commander-in-Chief Far East, Air Marshall Sir Robert Popham-Booke to seize the Thai Isthmus when he deemed it necessary.<sup>70</sup>

Thus, only two days before the outbreak of war, Britain’s operational commander finally had identified the correct decisive points, planned to control them, and received

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<sup>64</sup> Ong, 90-91.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Farrell, *Defence and Fall*, 104-105.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 66-69.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 140.

political authorization to do so. Force levels remained an issue, though there was always the hope that reinforcements would be found if Japan attacked.

## **Conclusion**

That Brooke-Popham never executed OPERATION MATADOR, even when Japanese ships were spotted approaching Thailand on 6 December 1941, remains one of the great what ifs of the Second World War.<sup>71</sup> If Britain had seized the Kra Isthmus would Japanese forces been repulsed? Per the leisurely pace of Singapore's defense planning to date, it would certainly have been uncharacteristic of the entire Singapore experience for the Commander-in-Chief Far East execute in a mere 48 hours a plan that required two decades to develop. Though such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, Brooke-Popham's inactivity strengthens the case for the need to correctly identify emerging decisive points at the earliest stage of planning possible.

Britain's defense of Singapore was set in a relatively simple operating environment. Changes took place slowly. Decisive points developed over decades. Operational commanders had the luxury of years of deliberate planning. Yet even at this relatively leisurely pace, Britain's pre-WWII operational commanders were unable to compensate for a newly identified decisive point.

Conversely, today's operational commanders are faced with far more complex operating environments. Despite the operating tempo, however, the complexities associated with decisive points remain valid. Emerging decisive points may be difficult to identify and even more difficult to accept. They may fly in the face of years of corporate knowledge and even force distasteful strategic decisions. The risk associated with the discovery of a decisive point must be mitigated as soon as possible. Decisive points at the operational level

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<sup>71</sup> Farrell, *Defence and Fall*, 141.

may be tied to strategic force allocation and political diplomacy: issues that may take a significant period of time to resolve. When the possibility of a new decisive point is identified, the operational commander must investigate it immediately and relentlessly. The investigation of one new decisive point may lead to the discovery of yet another, and in doing so revolutionary new operational plans may develop. Failure to control the decisive point hands control of it to the enemy and sets the stage for the next great disaster in military history.

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